

Lilia Shumkova

JOB OR DEATH IN PHILADELPHIA



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Job or death in Philadelphia

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It is a mystery novel with no geo-politics. P. J. James, a well known British mystery author, once said that the genre is so popular because it has a calming effect. Mystery stories have a positive influence over our angst; they appeal to the idea that “no matter how puzzling the crime, a solution exists.” And it exists not by chance, but because of people’s courage, intelligence, and perseverance. The main character is a woman with some leisure time on her hands to solve crimes, which she does with energy and perseverance. She doesn’t protect anybody, it’s she who needs nearly constant protection from people who, are aggrieved by her snooping. Instead of a wedding chapel at the end of the finish line, she expects to find a slice of cake and a cup of tea. So, it’s a comedy. This story is based of an investigation I conducted a few years back, following a hint from an acquaintance how nonprofit companies bringing immigrants to the US were making their money.

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Job or death in Philadelphia

An American crime novel

CHAPTER 1

Divorce stands out among other things I don't like about marriage. After three failed marriages, I still can't accept that a man I taught to shower, brush teeth, wear clean clothes, and eat healthy would start hunting on different hunting grounds and abandon me. I married my first husband by mistake. I married my second husband for romance; and I married my third husband for money.

My dad, a military officer, and mom, a nurse, thought I could do so much better with my looks and brains. They gave me a great education; I graduated from the University of Pennsylvania at 4th and Walnut Street in Philadelphia, which was an Ivy League college. I majored in Business Administration. Years ago, my parents had dreamed of me working for Bear Stearns or Lehman Brothers, running some important department, getting my career together, and marrying some executive, with a couple million dollars yearly benefits package, and having a couple of beautiful kids in a mansion.

Instead, I married a guy I had met at the Mystery Book Club in the local Ink & Blood book store. Steve was short, with a triangular 'chicken' chest and a round head. Add short-cropped hair, round glasses and a barn sweatshirt year-round, and you get the picture. He swept me off my feet, being an endless source of crime stories, real and fictional. He also educated me about gender relationships with my pregnancy as an unexpected complication. We got married a month before Iris invaded our lives and spent the following year arguing about which one of us should enter the Greater Philadelphia area workforce and start winning bread for the family. It was Steve who gave up and filed for divorce. Being single, he could stay in his parents' basement, have meals every day, and still keep up with reading every mystery novel ever published.

After Steve took off, and as a result of equitable distribution of marital property, I was left with our daughter Iris, and my first husband made away with the furniture and a 61-inch flat screen Scenium TV.

The local police department kicked my second husband out of our rental property after some amazing facts about his sex life surfaced.

I wasn't terribly surprised when my third husband walked out on me on a bright Monday morning. The night before we spent kissing in the dark; next morning, after a substantial breakfast, my husband finished his coffee, belched and said casually that he was leaving.

"Bye, sweetie," I said and rushed toward the door to see our daughter, Iris, on the bus.

"I mean, I'm leaving you."

I tripped over the carpet. The following day we spent arguing over divorce. It turned out that after four years of marriage; he went out to explore other options. He used the word 'options' like it wasn't our marriage and our child we were talking about, but some alternative routes to get to his relatives in New Jersey.

Our divorce was completed with a settlement based on an equitable distribution relief principle. My husband evicted his stepdaughter and me from his house in the presence of two cops, and let us take only our personal belongings, like a pile of mystery novels and computer games. My husband's lawyer argued in court that the defendant, a.k.a. me, contributed little to the family budget because I did not hold any job other than being a housewife. I couldn't afford a lawyer, so I argued on my own behalf that it was our mutual decision for me to become a stay-at-home mom. Still, I had produced

no income for the past four years, they argued, and was entitled only to child support. I lost my house, because it was my husband's; I lost my car, because it was my husband's as well. I kept some pieces of furniture, though. All antiques with mismatched drawers.

Struggling to survive in a sluggish economy, I took the first job available. I drove a cab, because I could keep my cab after hours. Besides, driving was one of my two favorite things to do. (The other was reading mystery novels.) I could drive anywhere, anytime, regardless of weather. When I wasn't behind the wheel, I would most likely be lying in bed with a new whodunit and a nice calorie-packed snack.

Six months later, I knew the streets of Philadelphia like my parents' backyard. We rented a place on 4th and Arch street, a quiet, sleepy neighborhood, where shootouts and police raids were usually over before three, and burglaries wouldn't start until nine in the morning. After moving here from a Huntingdon Valley mansion in the Philadelphia suburbs, we got burglarized twice. The first time, thieves took our TV, which I didn't miss; the second time, they took my quilt, which I did miss. In this neighborhood, a single white mother living without a boyfriend had 'troubles' written all over her; that's why I carried a compact pink, rubber-coated, ten-pound gym weight in my purse.

This particular glorious October morning, I kicked my Ford to life and cruised slowly towards Market Street Station, looking for a client. A man in a business suit flagged me down, and soon I had several dollars stuck in the pocket of my purse. Two hours later, rush hour turned the city streets into something remarkably similar to an elementary school's hallways: the same chaotic traffic, the same noise, and the same intense knowledge of the priority of one's needs. It was time to get off the road and have the second daily cup of coffee. I pulled into a secret parking space between two rundown buildings off Spruce and 13th Street and went into a tiny Uncle Tad's coffee shop. They brewed very strong coffee and carried good ole American Tastykakes at a thousand calories apiece, but that was all I needed to wake up and start a bright new day.

The place was packed and, stepping inside, I held the door for yet another hungry fellow. Moving in lockstep between narrow shelves, I felt the guy's hot breath on my neck. He got so close that he poked me in my head with the tip of his baseball cap. After three divorces, a man's body in proximity could cause skin irritation, nausea and seizures. Inhaling and exhaling rhythmically, I filled my cup with coffee, got a heavy chocolate Tastykake, paid at the door, and got outside as fast as humanly possible.

I finished my snack and coffee, sitting on the cab hood. Food stinks up the car too much, and I like to keep it clean. I threw the paper bag into a trashcan and opened the car door, when suddenly I was pushed inside the cab with such force that my face met the steering wheel and salty blood filled my mouth. Somebody clenched my neck from behind and ripped my earrings off. They were 3.5-carat diamond earrings that my third hubby had given me as a wedding present and forgot to include in the list of marital property items. The earrings were worth more than the cab I drove, but for me they also had a sentimental value, like tiny particles of dust from my past comfortable, suburban life. I never expected that the process of separation from my earrings would cause me so much pain. Instinctively, I turned around and smashed my purse into the predator's face.

He grunted, pulled his knee off my back, and ran. I reached him ten feet away and hit him with my purse again. He fell to the ground. I stepped on his wrist, bent over and, with a victorious cry, pulled my earrings from his clenched fingers.

According to the Silver Cab Company policy, I couldn't leave a cab unattended at any time. Jumping up like a mountain goat, I ran back to the car and got inside when the police interceptor wheeled in, soundlessly but with blinking lights. Thinking solely about the Silver Cab Company policy and the prospect of losing my job, I kicked the engine to life and floored the gas pedal. My Ford jumped ahead, and as if in a bad dream, I noticed a guy standing in front of the car. I slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. My Crown Victoria hit a man with a thud, knocked him off his long

feet, and moved on top of him. Moments later, the car door was flung open, and strong hands pulled me out and pressed me to the ground. I tasted not only blood in my mouth, but dust as well.

I spent the rest of the morning answering questions and signing papers. The sergeant detective, Chris McAfee, a middle-aged guy with a round, kind face, wanted to know if I had met my attacker before. I wasn't sure if the definition of the word 'before' covered a five-minute time period and answered negatively.

"Look here," the sergeant sighed, handing a statement to me to read. "This guy claims he lost his memory after you hit him twice with the weights. He claims not to remember his name and his address. We sent his fingerprints out, but it might take days before we get result, if he is local."

"What if he is not local," I asked, signing the statement without reading.

"If this is his first offence, or if he is not local, we might never find out who he is. That is why it is really important for you to recall seeing him before."

The assailant had been a bit taller than me, physically fit, with skin the color of a strong coffee brew. I've seen at least a dozen guys like him every day.

"Go, look at him again. Maybe it will help." The sergeant took me to the room with a glass wall, through which I could see my attacker talking to a cop. The diamond hunter was wearing blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and the nicest facial expression.

The sergeant picked up the receiver and listened to it for a couple of minutes, then turned to me with a sad smile.

"He says that he never attacked you. He says that he wanted to take a cab, and approached you, and you attacked him and hit him in his face. He says that you ripped off your earrings when the police car showed up."

"What?" I choked on my own saliva. "Wait. I was standing there, next to my car, having coffee. Then I opened the car door, he pushed me inside, smashed my face against the steering wheel, ripped off my earrings and took off. Now, he's saying that I attacked him? This is the most blatant lie I have ever heard in my life. What about the cop in the car? He saw..."

"He saw you jumping inside the cab and trying to drive away," the detective said.

"What about the guy I ran over? Maybe he saw something?" I was grabbing at the last straw, and the detective knew it.

"Maybe," Sergeant McAfee said, looking at me with fatherly compassion. "A very slight possibility. But we can't talk to him right now. He's got a brain concussion and right now he's sleeping in the hospital."

For lunch, I got a cup of weak coffee and a doughnut. Then Sergeant McAfee took me to the City Courthouse. We waited for half an hour for the judge to call my name. The judge, enormous in his black robes, observed me through his round glasses, then moved his glasses to the tip of his nose and observed me from above them.

"Okay, what do we have here? Rachel Rydal. Thirty-five years old. Physical assault on a man, disobeying a police order to stop and get out of the car, an attempt to escape from the police, in the process of which another man was hit and run over and was injured. What is this, ma'am?"

"I don't know," I said. "The black guy pushed me inside the cab and ripped off my earrings."

"Do you work?"

"Yes. I drive a cab." Hot tears ran down my face as freely as if the judge had just opened a faucet.

"Where are those earrings?" the judge asked. The sergeant produced a plastic bag with my jewelry. "Where did you get them?"

"They were my wedding present."

"Are you married?"

"No, your Honor. Divorced. One child."

The judge snorted, flipping through my case pages. "Okay, Ms. Rydal. Bail is set at nine hundred ninety-nine dollars. Find a lawyer, will you?"

Being unable to produce a thousand dollars, I was locked up in a cell at the police station for the night and had another weak coffee and a glazed doughnut for dinner. I needed to get out of jail while I could get through the doors. One permitted phone call was used to call my friend Kathy, who drove all the way from Montgomery County to pick up Iris to stay with her, until she gets money to bail me out. The idea of calling my parents never even entered my mind, since my dad had a serious heart condition, and I wouldn't be able to explain to him how just a brief involuntary encounter with another human being turned me from a nice, reliable, hard-working woman into a criminal.

Exhausted, I instantly fell asleep, and woke up in the morning to the voice of a police officer calling my name. For a moment, I couldn't recall what day it was and where all my furniture had gone.

"Rachel Rydal, you have somebody waiting for you." The young, handsome cop opened the cell door. I stepped out into a hallway while he was fastening handcuffs on my wrists and asked him if Kathy had paid the bail.

"They will give you all the information," the cop said, ushering me into yet another hallway. "You will get to meet your victim."

"My who...?" Well, excuse me, but it's me who was the victim. This was my role. I'd been a victim of circumstances, of my husband's treachery, of the sexual revolution, and a downsizing economy. And, if I victimized somebody, it was me, myself and I.

The police officer opened the door in front of me, and I stepped into a reception room with two men in gray suits standing there looking at me. The younger man was wearing dark sunglasses, as if he was hiding his face. It was he who said, "Ms. Rydal. Your bail is paid. Don't worry about anything. This is your lawyer, Joseph Madnick."

The older man with the huge shoulders and skinny legs nodded, scanning me over with a sour facial expression. Obviously, he didn't like the sight of me, an innocent woman, standing with my hands cuffed.

CHAPTER 2

"Where is your partner, son?" the man hoarsely asked a cop standing behind me. "She might be a homicidal maniac for all we know."

A what? And this was my lawyer?

"Listen," I straightened my back, feeling like a queen being tormented by a liberal member of a Parliament. "What do you want from me? I can't afford a lawyer. Don't you get it?"

"You don't have to pay a dime," the younger guy said. "Joe will take your case pro bono. He has some community hours to do this year. Don't you, Joe?"

"Thanks, but no, thanks." With hands tied behind my back, I could just shake my head in disagreement.

"Let me introduce myself first." The younger guy wasn't taking 'no' for an answer. "My name is Alexander Davidoff."

"Davidoff? Like vodka, eh?"

"Davidoff is an old, noble Russian family." The guy stared me down indignantly. "My great-grand-grandfather was a poet and a musketeer. He fought against Napoleon and won."

An overwhelming respect made me actually smile at him. I knew Napoleon was a brand of expensive French cognac. That was quite a heritage. Probably, his predecessor had sued the liquor company and won it. For a second, I wondered about all the money the family got. No wonder his great-grandson looked like a prince. Maybe it was his hobby to bail out women?

"Well," I said. "Why would you care to pay my bail for me?"

"Because," he replied, taking off his sunglasses and revealing black bruises around his eyes. "I'm the guy you hit with the car yesterday when I was rushing to help you. I saw everything that happened, and I think that..."

He was trying to say something else, but the door burst open and my best friend, Kathy Bowles galloped into the room, spitting words like machine-gun bullets.

"Are those your lawyers? Help her, guys. This idiot just jumped under her car. I think they work together: a black guy attacks people and a white guy jumps under cars. This way, they get jewelry and money from people and collect insurance money. Hi, I'm Kathy." She gulped for air. "I have your bail money, kiddo. Let's go, I'll take you home. Iris misses you."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Kathy, let me introduce you. This is Alexander Davidoff, the man I hit with my cab."

"Don't talk to them." Kathy regained her composure in a second. With her platinum blonde mane, starry-blue eyes and a motherly bosom, my friend looked like a size eighteen sex-bomb. "It's a criminal case, and you will get a state defense lawyer. Don't trust them. I've heard about these kinds of tactics of the opposite side acting friendly and all that. In no time, they will slap you with a million-dollar lawsuit."

The old guy, Mr. Madnick, burst out laughing, choked on his laugh and coughed, spitting out words, "She... doesn't have a million dollars... She is dirt-poor. She is judgment-proof!"

"Well," Kathy bared her long, white crocodile teeth. "Maybe you guys want her to rot in prison? You're not gonna get her."

"No, we just..." Mr. Davidoff started, but Madnick interrupted him, "I don't mind. She is the kind of girl my mama cautioned me about. Never believe a redhead. Never."

My friend clenched her heavy fists. "You're an evil man to say that."

"Yep, you got that right, ma'am. I'm an old, evil, crazy, white man with zero tolerance for criminals and shouting bitches."

He hadn't even finished his little speech when my best friend, red-faced and sweating, opened her purse, pulled out a bunch of dollar bills and stuck them at the old guy's face, shouting, "Did you see that? You will never get that. This is not for you. You are a money grubbing... lawyer!"

"Kathy, no...!" I shouted, and moved, trying to get between them. The officer behind me grabbed my cuffed hands and jerked me back. My weight was about one hundred fifteen pounds and the cop weighed twice that much. I lost my balance and stepped on his foot, sending both of us falling back. He hit the ground with a terrible thud, and I landed on his stomach.

Meanwhile, uninterrupted, Kathy threw the money at the old guy's fat face. He turned around and opened his palm to slap her, when Mr. Davidoff jumped and pushed him away. The old guy's legs gave up, and he went down like a doomed tree in a hurricane. Falling, he swung his leg and tripped Kathy, who, trying to keep her balance, grabbed Mr. Davidoff. I saw everything while the police officer jerked me up. An enormous pang of jealousy came over me the second I saw my injured cognac prince hugging my best friend.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Kathy sang at his face with her sweet Northeast Philadelphia accent. For ten years, she had been happily married to her college professor, but at that moment, I started to worry about the stability of her marriage.

"It's perfectly fine," Mr. Expensive Vodka answered, trying to untangle his arms from her long gorgeous hair.

A terrible moan sobered us all. The officer pushed me ahead, and we all gathered around lifeless Joe, who was lying on his back with his eyes closed.

Mr. Davidoff knelt in front of his older friend.

"Joe, are you okay? Do you need a doctor?"

The old guy responded with another gut-wrenching moan.

"He probably injured his spine. He can't talk," I said. Mr. Davidoff looked at me thoughtfully, obviously reevaluating his optimistic view of my mental health.

"He's your lawyer. He had better start talking, because that's what he does for a living."

As if hearing him, Joe opened his black eyes with eyelashes so long and thick they looked covered with layers of mascara and threw a dirty look at his friend. "How come you guys got to schmooze with these beautiful chicks and I didn't?"

Instead of locking us up for disturbance of the peace, the officer on duty gave us papers to sign and let us go. During the following two months, I saw Alexander Davidoff twice at the police station during the cross-examinations, once at the city court, and every weekend at my studio apartment, newly decorated with the bundles of freshly cut roses. By then, I discovered he was working for an international law firm, that his wife had left him and that his teenage daughter's name was Evana.

Two months later, on Christmas morning, I opened my eyes at eleven, because I had been working the night before. Looking out the window of my basement studio apartment, I saw two things that made me hysterical. First, my cab was nowhere in sight. Second, somebody's car was parked in my spot.

I jumped into jeans and ran outside. We had gotten little snow for Christmas this year, thank God. Here it was! A red shimmering Jaguar sat on its shiny tires. I looked around. My beat-up Ford was gone.

In quiet desperation, I ran up and down the street, screaming and yelling. My cab carried a parking permit, so it shouldn't have been towed. If it had been stolen, the police wouldn't waste their time looking for an old battered Crown Victoria. If I lost the cab, I wouldn't be able to make money to pay the cab company. I barely had enough for next month's rent.

Icy Christmas rain was pouring down my face by the time I returned to the Jaguar. What was this thing doing in front of my window, anyway? Had some drug dealer burned his money for this toy? That was it! They towed away my cab to let him park! Blood rushed to my head and, seeing red,

I ran toward the grossly overpriced pile of metal and started kicking its shiny grille. "Who parked this pile of shit here? This is my space! This is my parking space! Where is my car?"

I shouted because I couldn't be silent anymore about every injustice and abuse that had happened to me ever since my first husband sent me an e-mail saying that he wanted a divorce because he felt closer to his parents than to his wife.

Nobody came out to claim the Jaguar, so I kept kicking it until I smashed the grille.

"Hey," an eerily familiar voice said. "I can see that you like my gift!"

I turned around, wet sweatshirt and Mudd's jeans clinging to my bones; my mouth opened, and my eyes popped out. Alexander Davidoff stood behind me in his long gray London Fog raincoat. His brown-gloved hand was holding an umbrella.

"Huh?" I said and swallowed a handful of raindrops.

"I'm glad you like my Christmas present," Alexander repeated after a brief inspection of the car. "I'm glad you customized it right away. It looked kind of too new. Not your style."

CHAPTER 3

At thirty-five, I retired as a cab driver and acquired the most exquisite taste in clothes, furniture, architecture, design, landscaping and jewelry, all by virtue of my marriage to his highness, prince, landowner, and international lawyer, Alexander Davidoff. My new husband owned a family castle in Mooresville, NJ. Built a hundred years ago by his relatives as a hunting shed, the castle was an exact copy of a French mansion from the Champagne province. When I first saw this castle, two things became clear to me. First, I'd retired as a cab driver, and second, I have a lot of time on my hands to read mystery novels.

We moved in and spread out evenly through its fifty rooms. Under 'we' I mean Alexander, his daughter Evana, me, my daughter Iris, Alexander's butler Mark, the girls' tutor Larissa, Alexander's German shepherd Elvis, and my black cat Pepper.

Pepper was the first one to step inside our new house, according to the superstition rules of Alexander's old country. I agreed that the three-story gray stone mansion needed some good guardian spirits. We took the cat to the door in his basket and let him inside. He stepped on the shiny hardwood floor with his legs straight and inflexible like a little parading Pakistani soldier. The cat crossed the spacious entrance hall and then turned towards the kitchen. The shepherd, Elvis, surprised he wasn't the first one this time, trotted behind Pepper, sniffing the air.

"Hey," Alexander said, smiling. "They know their place in a house."

Our animals disappeared into the kitchen. Surprised, we rushed there too. I stopped at the door. The countertops and a round dining table were loaded with tons of pizzas, chicken pies, salads, cakes, grilled meat, and fruits. Amid this abundance stood a British-looking man, holding a baking sheet filled with hot rolls.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "Where have you been the whole morning? I was about to eat it all myself!"

That's how I met Mark, my husband's butler.

Tired of eating and moving, we took a trip around the house. There was a huge kitchen with a sunroom, dining room, living room, library, sauna, and a fitness room on the first floor. On the second floor were a master bedroom, my office, my husband's office, and the girls' bedrooms. Four spare bedrooms comprised the third floor. To clean all those square feet, we hired a cleaning aide, a middle-aged single mom named Claudia, against Joe's advice about how dangerous it was to have other people in the house. According to him, there was a scam running through the cleaning community. They work for you two months, and then they sue you for bodily injuries and mental abuse. They see that you have money, and why not try to nibble on your bank account a bit? My husband usually listened to Joe like the old guy was his godmother, but this time Alexander ignored his advice. The first time in my life I wasn't doing housework and working for money. The first week I felt like a queen; the next week I caught myself watching soap operas at midday and having a second lunch. When, in the third week, Mark woke me up for dinner after my lunch nap, I took it as a real wake-up call and decided to start my own charity.

It was a late spring Friday. In anticipation of a nice long family dinner and a romantic evening with my husband. I made a mountain of sandwiches and went to drop some food at Joe's office. I wheeled into the parking lot with Joe's Ford and somebody's Honda parked there. I didn't want to interfere, just to come in, place a package with lunch on a kitchenette table and leave.

"Rachel? Come here this instant."

Joe, who spent part of his life in the Navy, had a booming husky voice that could reach you and stop you in your tracks from a block away. I entered his office and greeted him and his client, a short bulky woman with brown hair.

"Listen, you nincom... Rachel, this is Deborah. Mrs. Cooper, this is Rachel, my assistant and my right hand. Can you please repeat your story to her? I found it very important that she would hear it from you."

Deborah looked at me. Her slightly bulging eyes welled with tears.

"I had just started a new job and my co-worker accused me of stealing money and jewelry from her. She was leaving for a new location, and I was taking over her position. I waited for this position for four months," she interrupted herself, sobbing. I brought her a cup of coffee, and she told us her story.

Debbie Cooper was from a family of college professors and scientists. In her parents' house, people discussed numbers and laws of physics as if it was breaking news and weather updates. She had known the multiplication table since she was five, thanks to her uncle Bruce, who made it a routine when coming for dinner to play a numbers game with her he called Number of the Day. "You can't go wrong with math," he liked to say. Being a genius mathematician himself, he worked for years on Wall Street as a market analyst, and after retirement at thirty-five, he took a tenured position at Princeton. His sister-in-law Elizabeth, Debbie's mother, herself was a professor of physics at the community college. Debbie's father used to be a financial analyst for Vanguard Group, but died a year ago of pneumonia complications.

Debbie's love of numbers made it very easy for her to get an honorary scholarship at NYU. She graduated with a Bachelor of Finances and became the youngest woman to work as an accountant for Goldman Sachs. That is where she had met her husband, Pitt Cooper, working for the IT department. Ten years older, he was a big, forceful man who always knew what to do, and to her, a calm, scholarly girl, he looked like a safe haven. They had their share of city dating, which means fast, quick and in a hurry, before their roommate or parents showed up. They got married after sixteen months of dating, got a Tribeca apartment and had two children one after another. Debbie worked part-time, trying to concentrate on her sons, especially the oldest son, Matthew, who developed ADD at the age of four.

She had wanted to move to the suburbs, she said, and after seven years, God heard her prayers: Pitt became the Head of the IT department at Gordon's Electronics in Philadelphia. They bought a spacious house in Cherry Hill and moved. Relaxed and happy in her new life, Debbie gets pregnant again, this time with a girl. Pitt, forty at the time, was completely crazy over this 'little angel,' as he called her.

Away from the New York intensity, Matthew seemed to outgrow his emotional problems. Life was perfect until Debbie realized Pitt had a drinking problem. She suspected him of having affairs: he was coming home late or not at all. The final straw was his moving in with his lover. Debbie filed for divorce.

"It was five years ago," she said, drying her eyes with a tissue. "We finalized our divorce only two months ago. It was all custody issues. He didn't want to give me the kids. He just tormented me."

Their family house was sold, and she and the kids rented a house. They couldn't stay in their family house because Pitt took it as a habit to come over every night, shouting and cursing her, and blaming her for their paradise lost. Deciding to buy a house, she took a full-time accounting and case-working job in the city with NOSE: The National Office of Services to Emigrants. She started on the 4th of May, and five days later, she was accused of stealing by her co-worker, a job developer, Mrs. Gamma Woods.

"I worked in the corporate world and I know the rules, so I filed an Irregular Incident Report the next day."

She opened a manila folder and read slowly, first, then faster.

"At the beginning of our conversation, Mrs. Gamma Woods notified me that she and her husband were coming at 8 pm to pick up the boxes with teaching materials from the office we shared for four days. When I told her that she was welcome to store her books and materials as long as it

was convenient for her, she said that she wanted to pick up all her stuff on Monday night because she was concerned about the safety of her materials."

"She said, 'My money and jewelry were stolen from my handbag on Friday May 8. I left my bag on the desk and was in and out of the office. Around lunchtime, I put the bag in the desk drawer. I took my bag from there around 8 at night and found that my money and jewelry were stolen. I thought that you would take care of my bag and look after it. I thought,' she said, 'that you would constantly be present in the office, making your phone calls, and would watch my handbag. Now, \$110 and my jewelry has been stolen from my handbag. I have been working here for twenty years and it has never happened before.'"

Joe listened, looking at Deborah with a funny expression on his face. His eyes were laughing.

"Did you see this damn handbag?" he asked, when Deborah stopped reading and reached for water.

"I did not see Mrs. Woods' handbag among her other belongings and teaching materials," she said firmly, as if he were a judge.

"Did she ask you to take care of her possessions?"

"She did not ask me to watch her bag. Why did she assume that her new co-worker was supposed to watch her bag?"

"I don't know," Joe replied. "I don't know what this woman is doing, but she definitely knows what she's doing. She's trying to destroy you. Anything else, ma'am, that you want to tell me?"

Deborah wiped her nose with a tissue. "Yes. I think it's very important that she had a financial transaction in the nearest drugstore from 3 to 3:30 pm, buying an inhaler for her husband, Mr. Woods, who was having an asthma attack. She had her handbag with her. If something was missing from her bag, why didn't she tell you about it at the time?"

"I don't know," Joe said. "And I would ask her a couple of questions. What items of jewelry were missing? Can she present photographs of her jewelry? You said that people from the Carolinas Institute had been moving the furniture. How many of them? Who was moving the furniture? Why didn't Mrs. Woods notify the police?"

"I found out," Deborah replied, "that Gamma Woods contacted everybody in our local office and in the head office and told people that her money and expensive jewelry had disappeared from her handbag while I was in the office. Last week everybody was talking about it. It's like a slap in my face. I never took even a match from anybody. It's simply not me. I can't work, I can't concentrate. I feel I should quit, but I have waited for this job for so long. I have bills to pay. I have to put food on the table." Deborah blew her nose. "Please, help me. I have to sue this woman. She wants me to be fired because I took over her position."

"It's a terrible way to keep your job," Joe muttered and lit up a cigarette. He was lounging in his chair, looking up at the ceiling. "How long has she been working there? Gamma Woods... Right?"

"Right." Debbie nodded solemnly. "She has been working there for twenty years. She is a Philippine woman who came to this country about twenty years ago. I don't think she has as good an education as I do, but she has got tons of experience. She knows exactly what this job needs."

"Why was she getting removed?" I asked, still a little stunned by Joe calling me his 'assistant.' Until now, he hadn't called me anything but 'nincmpoop.'

"I don't know the real reason," Debbie responded. "She seems very well fit for this place."

"She definitely sounds so," Joe laughed, and then coughed. "You, ninc..., I mean Rachel! What would you do if you worked for twenty years for a company, and then got replaced and even fired?"

"I would cry," I said after a brief consideration. I never worked over six months in one place, but I didn't want Joe to know that.

"Well, Gamma made somebody else cry. Deborah, this is my little scenario for you for the next two weeks. In a couple of weeks, they will fire you for something, for anything: using too much toilet paper, having blue eyes, being right-handed or wearing gray business skirts." Joe puffed his Newport.

"No, they can't fire me. I'm a very good worker. I have great education and experience." Debbie started sobbing, this time becoming angry with the attorney she decided to hire. Honestly, I felt like throwing my shoe at the guy.

Joe just smiled. "They can, and they will. Babe, what poked you in the eye to take a job for a Philadelphia company? You live in New Jersey, so get work in New Jersey. Go and work for your kids' school district. You will be around them. You can always take a day off; you know all the news. You're a single mom! Leave the corporate world to bitches like Gamma Woods. Pennsylvania is an At Will state. Employers have all the rights there. They can fire you at any time for any reason at all, and you can't sue them for that. But there's something else here. Seems to me you've got in the middle of something. You want to sue them? Let's sue them! File a libel, slander and defamation of character lawsuit. Are they a corporation?"

"Yes, they receive government money for working with immigrants. It's a big corporation. I actually found it very bizarre the way they treat refugees. They have this interoffice code, and they call their immigrant clients 'moo-moos'."

"I like that. I truly do." Joe frowned. "Let's sue them for a couple of million dollars. You'll get a half million-dollar settlement, buy a new house and start working for your local school district."

Joe pulled a pile of paper out of his drawer and offered Debbie an agreement to sign. She even smiled, listening to his intense speech. I heard him once in court arguing on my behalf and knew that he could be loud and eloquent in defending his clients.

Walking her to her car, I promised Debbie that everything would be great. She grabbed my hand. "I'm so glad you're a woman. You can understand me; how terrible this is! First divorce, then this... I try to do everything I can for my children, but I have to work and pay bills. I don't understand why I must suffer so much. Please, work on my case. This woman is evil."

I promised her to do everything in my power and returned to the office. Joe was sitting in the kitchen, munching on sandwiches.

"So? Why did you call me your assistant? This poor woman really hopes we will work on her case."

"So? Do you believe she is not a thief?" He had this horrible habit of giving you a question for an answer.

"I believe her. She's a single mom, and she needed this job desperately. The other woman was losing her job. They wanted her out after twenty years. It's not good either, but Debbie has nothing to do with it."

"Are you sure?" Joe looked at me with his impossible black eyes. "What if Debbie had a relationship with their boss? What if they're lovers? You're a nincompoop. Somewhere, somehow, there is a reason she got into this situation. If we find the reason, we find the best way to defend her in court. Now you, young lady, just look for this reason."

"Me?"

"Who else? Not me, thank you very much. I'm staying in my office because I've got other stuff to do. Some very urgent and important stuff. If you like her, if you like this case, be my assistant. Interview her co-workers, take depositions, arrange a polygraph test for her. If she doesn't flunk it, we will take her case to court. They bid for federal money, they need a squeaky-clean reputation. And in this case, their reputation won't be so squeaky-clean anymore."

Getting outside, I squinted at the shiny spring afternoon. I thought it could happen only to a book character, to have your life completely overturned in a moment. This morning I didn't know what to do and felt useless while my life was slipping through my fingers. My husband worked day and night looking for war criminals and defending their victims. My daughters opposed my slightest attempt to mother them. My house was cleaned, and food cooked by somebody who was making a living out of my laziness. Suddenly, it all started to make sense because I realized what I should

be doing my entire life. I would be a lawsuit investigator! I would gather all the bits and pieces of information that would constitute our victory over evil.

Angels blew their trumpets, it was my life calling, I knew that.

"I'm a lawsuit detective," I repeated to myself over and over again, driving home. I felt a sharp intense energy boiling inside of me. "I'll become the damn best lawsuit detective ever." Since it was almost four in the afternoon, I decided to start my investigation right after dinner.

CHAPTER 4

The monkey see, monkey do principle would be the best way to describe my way of life until this point. I have always been worried about my future. I felt terminally ill most of the time. I always hoped to end up with a bigger paycheck and a balance of my long-term investments. And always, I was taking on new relationships and new jobs with the mad enthusiasm of somebody who has never been beaten and never been abandoned.

Pulling into the driveway, I cursed secretly, because Larissa's car was parked right in the middle of it. Larissa was my aide, but somehow, she tried to take a special place in the family. Alex insisted on hiring her as a part-time shopping aide for me and a part-time tutor for our girls. My husband believed modern children need a grandmotherly influence in order to grow into stable and mature adults. He used to say that in his old country, grandmothers constituted a special social institution: more influential than the Orthodox Church, and more advanced than an academic school.

We couldn't possibly get a grandmother in our own family. My mom was still working on her retirement plan. My husband's mother was a grand dame, socialite and full-time Londoner. There was no way she could fit two teenage girls in her schedule between lunch with the Prime Minister and dinner with Rupert Murdoch. That's why Larissa, being an old Jewish lady, fit right into our puzzle.

Entering our home, I received a doggy attack from Elvis. Forgetting that he had begged me out of my breakfast this morning, this source of eternal love jumped and slobbered all over me.

"Rachel!" Larissa summoned me to the kitchen. "I think the girls are upset with each other. Something happened in school. They don't want to tell me what. As a mother, I think you should talk to them."

As a mother, I would rather have a cup of coffee right now, especially seeing Larissa sitting at the table with her cup of Earl Grey and biscuits. Of course, I didn't say that. Alexander thought that the European system of rearing children was superior to the American. In his eyes, Larissa, after teaching English at some schools in Moscow, Berlin, and New York for thirty years, was an embodiment of this system. I went to the entrance hall and shouted for the girls at the top of my lungs. I knew it was a no-no, but I would rather have the girls come down to the kitchen, than walk up to their rooms. Frankly, it is healthy for kids to get in a fight now and then, because this way they build up their conflict-solving muscles for future adult life.

First, Iris showed up with a thunder of heavy footfalls. She was taller than the other eleven-year-olds, with long blonde hair and dark brown eyes.

"Mom," she crashed into a chair with a moan. "When is dinner? I'm starving."

I took her words about starvation with a great deal of healthy doubt, looking at her slightly bulging tummy and peach-like cheeks, but Larissa sprang into action. She turned to me with her well-groomed head with a strawberry blonde hairdo and offered to feed the child with something healthy.

"A couple of spoons of nonfat cottage cheese with a bit of sour cream will do her just fine before dinner," she let me know.

"Sour cream? Yuck." My sweet angel made a retching sound.

"What is so yucky?" Evana asked, entering the kitchen with a quiet grace of hers. She was my daughter's age, but shorter, slimmer, with dark brown hair and bright blue eyes.

"Mom wants us to have cottage cheese for a snack. Can you imagine?"

Evana considered the news for a moment. "Well, it might not be that bad," she said flatly.

I opened the fridge, found a tub of cottage cheese tucked away in the door compartment, and sniffed it. It looked fresh to me, but I tasted it, just in case.

"It's not even sour," I announced after taking a bite. "Tastes kind of chalky, but this is the healthy part, I guess." I spooned the white substance into tiny ice cream bowls for the girls.

"Mom," Iris looked at me with alarm. "Where did you get this jar?"

"In the fridge... No talking, just eat and go. We have to cook dinner."

"Mom," Iris insisted. "Show me the jar."

I showed her.

"Ah, this is not the cottage cheese. This is my dough clay, for my science project."

Somehow, eating clay gave me a burst of energy, because I stayed in the kitchen to help Mark, my British cook, to make turkey soup. I have my special way of cooking turkey soup, which I invented while living in Center City and driving a cab. This soup, like any other great invention, came into existence by accident and lack of resources. It was the day after Halloween, and Iris had overdone it with sweets. Her stomach hurt, so she stayed home from school. I did a six-hour shift and went home. The best treatment for stomach sickness is chicken soup, no doubt about it, but we had only turkey breast. I found two potatoes, a tomato, a white onion, a red bell pepper, and moldy spaghetti squash. Cooking a vegetable stew, I sautéed chopped onion and pieces of turkey in olive oil. Then I dropped in tiny slices of bell pepper, potatoes, squash and tomato, and I poured some water to top the stew. I let the soup cook slowly for two hours on medium heat; finally, I just added a little garlic and soy sauce to it.

The result was amazing. My strictly no-soup-please daughter finished two helpings and announced that her stomach hurt no more.

After dinner would be the best time to tell Alex about my new investigating job. Five minutes before six, he called and said he was running late. The girls got their dinner in the TV room. Larissa ate in the kitchen, and I just sat in my favorite recliner, reading a mystery novel. Glistening with silverware and china, the dinner table remained untouched.

Around midnight, my husband's car pulled into the driveway. I ran outside to hug him, and his smell made my head spin. It was okay that we missed a family dinner, because at the end of the week we would have two days all to ourselves. I'll be able to be with him for two days!

"I'm starving," he said, entering the kitchen, still in his business suit. "Oh, soup."

I poured soup for him and ran to the bathroom for a quick makeover, feeling all fuzzy and romantic. It took two minutes to shower, slide into my silk nightgown, brush my teeth, and put on a touch of French perfume. However, when I returned to the kitchen, he wasn't there. I ran upstairs to our bedroom and found my beloved husband lying on the bed, still fully dressed.

"Honey, do you want to take it off?" I pulled the sleeve of his jacket. He didn't respond. Only when I was pulling his pants off, he said, "Phew, what's that smell? It's awful."

I lay next to him in the dark, hoping that he didn't mean my expensive French perfume he praised so much when fully awake.

I tried to shut out the annoying ringing in my ears when I realized it wasn't an alarm clock. It was my cell phone.

"Rachel," I croaked, picking it up. It was two o'clock in the morning, and I hate phone calls in the middle of the night.

"Joe Madnick. How are you?"

"I don't know. I was sleeping."

"Come here this instant. I need your help. Don't ask questions; just come to my office now." He hung up and left me staring at the darkness in disbelief.

Why would Joe call me in the middle of the night? And then I remembered; he appointed me as his detective. I'm a lawsuit investigator! I jumped out of my bed, pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, grabbed a jacket and went outside. My red Jaguar greeted me with its lights when I unlocked the door. I looked around our dark property, breathing the chilly spring wind, smiling to the dawn of my new life.

Driving, I thought about some crooked ways life rewards us. I wasn't even thinking of becoming a detective, with all my love of mysteries and whodunits. I didn't have any special training and education. I would never get this job if I tried to look for it. Joe would reject me if I asked him to

hire me. But I was in the right place at the right time. He was backed up; I came with a pack of sandwiches. Voila! He asked me to do some investigative legwork for his law firm.

I felt so much pity for Debbie. I have been through the hell of single motherhood. Her case seemed obvious to me. If this Philippine woman accused her new co-worker with such ease, she probably did something similar to other people before. In twenty years, she stepped on some toes. I had to find those people and talk to them. I needed to find a couple of witnesses who would testify against Gamma Woods.

Joe's voice boomed in my ears, "Get out there and talk to people, find as many as possible whose who can tell that Debbie is a nice decent lady. I don't want to paddle to court just to meet a material witness saying that Debbie stole before."

For his office, Joe used his own house, a two-story red brick townhouse with a lawn up front and a parking lot in the back. At two o'clock in the morning, the house looked spooky. All the lights were off. I knocked at the door, and it opened a crack, just enough for me to get in. Once inside, I was grabbed and pressed against the wall.

"Shish!" Joe put his fat fingers on my lips. "Don't talk." Moonlight in the entrance hall was just enough for me to see that he looked exactly like I left him in broad daylight. Which means he wasn't attacked or injured, just mildly paranoid.

"Did anybody see you coming here?"

"I don't think so..."

"Rachel, don't think too much!" he whispered and cleared his throat. "It's my job." He stood plastered on the wall, peeking out the door window in complete silence for a very long time before saying, "Okay, now, it's time."

He opened the door, let me outside, and ushered me into his car soundlessly. With his bulky body, he moved in the dark like a cat, reminding me he served some years as a Navy Seal, doing who knows what, who knows where.

Getting into the driver's seat, he didn't put a seatbelt on, just started the car and pulled off his driveway onto the street. There was something eerie in the way we were moving through the neighborhood, and it took me some time to realize he hadn't turned his headlights on. Plus, the car had tinted windows.

"What's going on?" I whispered. "What do you want to do?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," he whispered back at me. "Just do what I say."

After a couple of miles, he wheeled to the opposite side of the street and parked without turning off the engine. I got out, obedient to his command, while Joe was shifting his big body inside the car, trying to get out. Not having enough room, he put his left foot on the ground and pressed the car horn with his elbow. His honking woke up the whole neighborhood. Dogs barked, and the light went on and off in the next house up the street.

The house on the hill across the lawn from us remained dark and silent. Joe exhaled like a whale and proceeded to the car's rear. He popped the trunk up, pulled out an oddly shaped bag, and handed it to me. It was slippery. He, himself, got a heavy object that looked like a white box. He carried the box to the lawn and left it there. I put the slippery bag next to it. Shaking and sweating, I was trying to kill the thought that those objects were the remains of some annoying material witness who crossed my new boss.

Joe trotted back to his car, got another boxy white thing, and dumped it next to the first one.

"Get in the car," he commanded, though it took him more than a second to get inside and start the engine. He wheeled back to the right side of the road, turned on the headlights, and lit his cigarette.

"What did we just do?" I squeaked.

"Take this, you need it." He gave me his cigarette.

I don't smoke, but neither do I dump things on people's front lawns; so, the cigarette felt like the right thing to do.

"How was it?" my boss asked.

"Terrifying!"

"Yeah... Especially when I tooted my horn in the middle of the operation. Everything because it was so secretive."

"What was it?"

"My old toilet tank."

My cigarette flew out when I coughed. "Your toilet tank? You woke me up in the middle of the night to dump your toilet tank on other people's property?"

"You have to understand, I was too embarrassed to put them in front of my office. These rich people have so many kids, it's natural for them to throw out toilet tanks. Nobody would give a shit about it. And I'm a lawyer. I have clients coming. I have done so much work, by the way, since you left. I installed two new toilet tanks. Now, the toilet flush sounds like a military jet."

"So, that was the important business you needed to do. That's why you didn't come for dinner. That's why you didn't want to discuss Debbie's case with me!"

Toilet tanks did me in. From now on, I will investigate everything myself without Joe's help. I will just report the results. I will never let him know how I got my information. And I knew just where to start: Debbie's new house and her neighbors.

Next morning, I slept through my husband leaving for work, and didn't wake up for my children's breakfast. It was ten when I finally opened my eyes and dragged myself to the kitchen. After my nocturnal dumping trip, I felt out of place, as if I had just come in from Europe.

"Sleeping in today?" Larissa's voice had a sarcastic undertone to it. "You don't look good. You know, it's destructive for a woman of our age to spend nights out. Here, your cup of strong coffee."

"Thanks, Larissa. Did the girls behave this morning?"

"They were unusually quiet. I think your absence stressed them out. A daily routine is more important for children than anything else. They expected you to see them off, and as always, you weren't there for them. Have a piece of toast with your coffee. Don't just gulp it down. It's bad for your stomach." She gracefully put her fingers through her curly strawberry hairdo. She might be well into her sixties, but she insisted on looking forty-five.

I fixed myself toast and jam, watching how a secret thought was boiling inside the old lady like soda mixed with lemon juice.

"You know, Rachel," she finally gave up. "You know, I like to read before going to bed. I only read very good authors like Dan Brown. There is no point wasting your life on anything inferior. I mean horrors or mysteries."

I nodded in complete agreement.

"Though last night I was reading a very interesting historical novel about a great medieval artist. You wouldn't know his name, anyway.... Suddenly, I heard some noise. Heavy footfalls... It was two o'clock in the morning. Of course, I rushed to check on the girls. You know, I am a highly responsible and dependable person. And I got a glimpse of you, in this yellow jacket, getting into your red car and driving away." She wrinkled her lips disapprovingly.

"So?"

"It's not any of my business, of course, but I believe Alexander noticed your absence." Burning with curiosity, Larissa bent over the table and knocked down her cup with her skinny, sharp elbow.

"I'll talk to him." I stood up abruptly and left, leaving the poor old lady to brew in her own sauce.

CHAPTER 5

Debbie's current address was written in my memory in huge letters, and yet, being an exemplary assistant, I gave my boss an unanswered phone call, and only then did I set off for my trip.

It took me about an hour to get there. Why Deborah got a job in Center City to drive from New Jersey remained a mystery to me. The town's main street had a shopping center and a used car dealership. I stopped at McDonald's to use a bathroom and to grab something to eat. Larissa had an amazing ability to poison mealtime, and after a couple of skipped breakfasts, the whole idea of having a grandmotherly figure in the family didn't look so wise anymore. But try to tell this to Alexander! To have a live-in grandma is part of a healthy and happy childhood, and nothing could change his mind. I went in, munched down chicken salad, and followed it with soft ice cream to get my daily sugar fix. No matter what they say, fast food is a mood-altering substance, and it always works for me in stressful times.

Pulling in, I saw a couple of trucks and minivans. Right after me, a decrepit maroon Honda had pulled in and parked next to my Jag. The Honda's driver hadn't gotten out, just pulled down the windows.

Now walking back to my car, I peeked at the maroon car on the right. The driver, a very young blond man with sharp cheekbones, ate a sandwich. His car looked like a dump, with all those papers and clothes and newspapers swamping its seats. Even the car radio sounded fuzzy and out of tune, transmitting some weird talk show, as if several men were talking at once, describing their location and little observations: "12:15 Object One is in the parking lot," or "12:15 Object Ten stays at the office."

My sparkly clean Jag felt like a safe haven. Somehow, seeing other people's misery makes me appreciate what I have more. I drove back onto Main Street looking for Pike Road, finally spotted it and turned at the last moment. I found the number 2550 right away. It was especially easy, since several police cars were parked along the quiet street as a free attraction for a few local viewers.

Debbie shouldn't see me yet. That's why, getting ready in the morning, I put on my daughter's clothes: blue bellbottoms and a t-shirt with a yellow windbreaker. My red hair I hid under an NYU baseball cap. It was a decent outfit to become invisible in any crowd. The moment I approached Debbie's place, the entrance door opened, letting out two cops and a tall middle-aged man with cuffed hands. The man looked back at the house and smiled. He looked intelligent and handsome, and a little run down, like an old brick Georgian house.

"What's going on here?" I asked a woman in sweatpants and a t-shirt standing on the lawn.

"Her ex just got arrested for trespassing." She turned her head.

"Is it Debbie's ex?"

"Do you know her?" Ms. Sweatpants turned to me completely. Her gray and brown hair wildly went up in spirals.

Before I came up with a lie, the cops searching Debbie's ex's metallic Pathfinder popped its trunk and removed a long semi-automatic gun. They asked him for a gun permit; "In the glove compartment," he answered. After sorting through his papers, they found the permit. The police officers placed the gun in the trunk of the police cruiser and took off, leaving one behind to console Debbie.

"Do you know her?" Ms. Sweatpants poked my ribs with her elbow.

"Not really. I'm her new social worker. Just came down here from the district office to look at their place," I lied. "Do you know them?"

"They just moved in, you know. But we've already got some questions. You wanna hear this? By the way, I'm Meg. I work as a nurse at a local preschool. Wanna have a cup of coffee at my place? This is my house, just in front of us." Talking, she looked like a beaver with her protruding front teeth.

Her tiny kitchen was furnished with outdated but clean drawers and shelves and stuffed with craft items: heavy clay mugs, animal figurines, blue glass bottles of every shape and size, and glass pictures. Meg poured us a little coffee, talking non-stop.

Debbie and the kids had moved in a year ago. The house she stayed in was a rental, so lots of people lived there over time. Meg never knew them and tried to do her best to stay away.

"Interest rates are so low, everybody buys a house now. Who rents? Just young people and troubled families... Single mothers, like her."

She, herself, had a husband and was very proud of the fact, judging by a dozen shots of her and some bald guy stuck to the fridge door. Noticing me staring at the pictures, she said she was the only married woman at her daycare center.

"It's easy to get married," she said happily. "The trick is to keep your husband."

I couldn't agree with her more. I never managed this trick and saw Alexander as my last matrimonial endeavor.

Meg knew nothing of Debbie, but unfortunately, her son Ken was Matthew's classmate, and Matthew got in the habit of tormenting Ken.

"Is he a bully?" I asked, remembering suddenly that I was his social worker.

"He is... You know, we call these kids 'without brakes.' As if he doesn't understand that people have feelings. He doesn't understand what he is doing."

I quickly learned from Meg that during six months of school, Matthew twice went to a psychiatric clinic. Once, for hitting his pregnant teacher in her bulging stomach, and next time, for setting the principal's car on fire.

"You know, I work with kids every day from seven to five. I mean, I would like a different job, but I can't get anything. I'm furious with Matthew, but pity him, too. You understand; he is not an evil boy. He just acts out of desperation, or something. It's all because of his father. I mean, there are police at their place every week, and every week the boy does something stupid. His father doesn't want to leave them alone. He doesn't want to give up. His mother doesn't want her ex back. Can you imagine this kind of mess?"

Meg explained how to find the school building, so I could look at the boy's personal record. Damn, Joe wanted me to talk to people about her, but didn't supply me with any helpful information.

The school was located just a couple of blocks away from Debbie's place in a sprawling cinderblock building with a "No Drug Zone" warning at the beginning of the driveway. I pulled up to the entrance and rang the bell. An elegant lady came from the other side, looked at me through the glass, and unlocked the door.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm the Coopers' new social worker, and I need to talk to the principal. I don't have an appointment. I just drove by."

"It's perfectly okay. I'm the principal. You can come in. Sorry, I can't spend a lot of time with you. School will be out soon. But I certainly can answer a couple of your questions."

It was quiet inside the school, like the eye of a hurricane. I followed the principal to her office, where she introduced me to the state of Matthew's affairs.

"You know, of course, the real reason Matthew Cooper is under the surveillance of the Children and Youth Department?" The principal looked straight into my eyes.

"Well, I just got his case. I'm not familiar with every detail."

"Then you are talking to the right person. Matthew is a pyromaniac. He's fascinated with fires." Who isn't? I like to sit next to a fireplace and stare at the fire.

"There is always the possibility that he can set fire anytime and anywhere. Here, at school, we keep our eye on him. Home is a different story. His mother, Mrs. Cooper, works full time." The principal apologized and picked up the ringing phone.

"May I look at his personal records, please?" I asked the second she hung up the phone.

"Yes, of course," she said and walked to the door. "Nobody can see the students' personal records, but the school authorities. You are a social worker, so you have the right to view the materials also."

She disappeared behind the door and left me rejoicing quietly. Who said that school ladies are strict and unreachable? They are nice and very gullible. The principal came back with a thick folder in her elegant hands. It looked heavily read, with dog-eared pages, pictures of the burned car, and copies of the police reports.

"I apologize. I have to leave you for five minutes." The principal gracefully left the room.

It turned out that Matthew was fourteen, and that he used to have excellent grades in elementary school. Then something happened, and the boy lost touch with reality. Otherwise, why did all those incident reports suddenly come into the picture? Sorting through the papers, I finally found what I was looking for: the Coopers' old home address at Cherry Hill, which was printed on the top of some inquiry letter. In an emergency form, the phone number of Pitt Cooper, their father, was listed as a priority emergency contact. I copied the address and the number down and was about to return the documents when my cell phone rang.

"Report to my assistant," Joe's voice boomed with excitement. "I have a spider as big as my thumb building a web outside of my kitchen window."

"So?" I feverishly flipped through the remaining pages.

"You have to come here and take it down." My impossible boss was true to himself.

"No, not right now. I'm digging up some dirt here."

"And...."

"I'm all dusty."

"Okay, keep digging. Just remember, you have an appointment with Planet Security at two tomorrow. Don't forget to bring Mrs. Cooper over there. Good luck. Don't flunk it, both of you." And like that, he was gone.

What the hell is 'Planet Security'? Aren't polygraph tests administered by the FBI? The office door opened. The principal stood behind it, holding the knob and talking to a little girl. I flipped the last page and saw familiar lettering: NOSE, the National Office of Services to Emigrants. Whoever came up with a name for that place definitely was an illiterate foreigner. Emigrants are people who leave a country for some other country. People who are coming here to America are immigrants! Debbie's workplace sounded trashy to me. I couldn't figure out any reason she decided to take work there. I didn't have time to read the letter, and instead, just folded it and put it in the pocket of my jacket.

"I apologize for leaving you alone, but this time of day is really busy." The principal took the folder from me and tucked it safely under her arm. "Please, let me know if you need any help."

On the way back home, I stopped just once to get gas. While my little red sexy gas-gobbler was getting filled up, I went to the station restroom. Its massive metal door was locked and scratched all over, as if somebody was trying to open it using the wrong key. To get a key, I walked into the station and found myself at the end of a waiting line. A tall, skinny guy was buying several dozen lottery tickets. The cashier needed to enter every number on every ticket manually. Clicking, the machine was gradually spitting printed tickets at him.

"Excuse me!" I shouted, standing at the door.

The cashier didn't even look at me.

"May I get the restroom key?"

The cashier looked at me and opened his mouth to say something, when the skinny man whirled towards me like a blood-thirsty hyena. I saw them in a safari park in Florida. They have glossy eyes, as if thawed after a long-term freezing.

"The cashier is busy; don't you bother him," he whispered.

"I just need the key to the restroom," I said.

But the damage was done. The cashier just stood there, scratching his head.

"Did you want the Powerball, or what?" he asked finally.

"Yes," the thawed guy screamed. "I told you five times; put a hundred dollars on the Powerball lottery! They have one of the biggest games in their history, five hundred million dollars. Hurry up! They are closing up in five minutes."

"I'm sorry." The cashier, a boy merely out of high school, whispered. "I pressed the wrong button. It's all gone to the Number of the Day game. I'm sorry."

The skinny guy started to shake and emit steam like a burning teakettle. "You're not sorry yet. You will pay for this, or I will make you sorry!"

"I can't pay for this. It's a hundred dollars," the boy reminded him, desperately trying to keep his tears at bay. "I'm earning forty dollars a day."

"I don't care how much you earn. Now, I'm not paying for this. The transaction was completed, so you pay." The thawed guy jerked his hundred-dollar bill out of the boy's hand and left the station with a look of triumph shining through his glossed eyes.

A second later, a manager materialized out of thin air. His verdict was similar: your error, pay for it. The cashier was crying openly now.

Nobody said a word. My car was ready to go, but I desperately needed to use the bathroom.

"Hey," I said. "Don't cry. Check those numbers. Maybe you've got a couple of bucks."

"Yeah, right! Check those numbers, bro." The line responded enthusiastically. The winning numbers started to run across the black screen on the top of the counter. Sobbing, the boy looked at his couple of feet of tickets. It would take him an hour to check every ticket, and I was about to piss in my pants.

"Hold it," I said, meaning myself. I moved forward, grabbing the tickets from the boy's hand, tearing them along with the perforation, and giving a bunch of tickets to everybody in the line.

"Look for the numbers I'm reading," I said, and dictated numbers off the screen. The numbers ran too fast, so I wrote them down on my bunch of tickets. Alas, I dictated the numbers several times, and nobody found a match.

"Well," I said finally. "Maybe you can give me a restroom key now?"

"What about the tickets in your hand?" the manager asked me. I was so busy picturing myself opening the restroom door and devoting myself to my guilty pleasures that I forgot about my share of tickets. Two of them had no matches, but the third one had the matching numbers of the day!

"Your total win is one million dollars," I said, handing the winning ticket to the dumbstruck boy. "Now, give me the restroom key."

Driving home, I was trying to recall where I heard the words 'number of the day.' Somebody mentioned it recently, but I just couldn't recall. The other burning question was the polygraph test. Two in the afternoon tomorrow was less than twenty-two hours away. I should advise Debbie about that. What was this company's name again? Where was it? Even though the kids were back home, and dinner had to be started shortly, I made a wild turn before entering Mooresville, and went to Joe's office.

CHAPTER 6

Running into the office, I howled, "Joe, I have some new dirt!" He wasn't at his desk. I opened the bathroom door – empty. The kitchen looked deserted as well. Bewildered, I looked in the window to see if his car was in the driveway. A nauseating sense of danger came over me.

"Joe! Joe!" I shouted in panic.

A loud snort from under my boss's desk made me walk around and look there. Joe was lying on the floor with his eyes closed.

"Joe, are you okay there?" I whispered and touched his stomach to make sure he was alive.

"Watch yourself, young lady," he said angrily, and opened one eye for a second. "What do you think you're doing?"

"But, I..."

"You're storming into my office during regular business hours, waking me up from a sound sleep, screaming that you have dirt on my client?"

"But, you..."

"My clients are everything to me. They're above any dirt, like Caesar's wife."

"But, she..."

"By the way, young lady, your husband is about to come back from work; and you're here, touching another man's body. What is that all about?"

"I was looking for your heartbeat."

"For my heartbeat...?" He shook with his impossible laughter. "This is my stomach you were touching. My heart is not in my stomach. No-no, young lady. It's down there. Moo-moo."

No sharp comebacks occurred to me this time around. I got out from under the table and went to the kitchenette to get a cup of coffee. How could he call me a 'moo-moo'? I did all this legwork, and that was my reward. Unfair.

"Where is my coffee?"

I turned around and there was my boss, sitting in his huge black leather chair, smoking like a chimney. I offered him my cup.

"Okay, now show me your dirt."

"This morning, Debbie's hubby was arrested for trespassing on her property, stalking, and a gun permit violation."

"Right." Joe was puffing his cigarette, his eyes foggy. "Continue."

"That's it."

"That's it? You spent the whole day of fieldwork just to find out that Pitt Cooper was arrested on his ex-wife's property? I could find it out by just turning on my computer. Nincompoop. Now, listen to my dirt." He emitted a cloud of black smoke. "This morning Debbie had a divorce hearing. She has a Protection From Abuse Order against her ex, and there is no way he should be at her house. However, this is his first trespassing, and if convicted of a misdemeanor, he won't get this conviction on his criminal record. Which is good for him, considering the position he has in his computer company."

"Now, the judge let him off easy and gave him a three hundred dollar fine. You know, the guy is earning more than a hundred thousand dollars a year. He represents himself as if he doesn't have any money. He opens his mouth and says that he will appeal. The judge says, 'Thank you for telling us that. Then, it's a five hundred dollar fine. Thank you very much.' But the most important thing is that his appeal is going straight on the docket for the next hearing. This way, the guy had got a criminal case against him. He brought it on himself! Next time he shows up at her house, it's a repeat offense and he gets convicted of a felony and goes to prison. He didn't understand it when he threatened an

appeal to the judge. He wanted to piss off the judge as he did during the five years of custody battle, but this time he was pissing against the wind." My boss lit up the next cigarette.

"Do you realize you're a chain smoker?" I asked, showing that I cared about his health.

"Now, you're digging dirt on me, babe? Don't even start. I know more about you than you know about yourself."

"Good for you." I stopped for a moment, trying to recall stuff in my life that was worth hiding.

"Where was I?" my boss asked me.

"The guy was pissing..."

My boss's black eyes smiled.

"Right... Now, the police searched his car and found a gun. A real live gun."

"That's what I was talking about. He wants to kill her, to have the last word in their divorce. She is in danger."

"No kidding?" Joe leaned against his chair. "Well, what do we have to worry about? She didn't pay upfront. If he kills her, we just close the case. Done deal."

I left Joe's office with his promise to come for dinner. Back home, I found Iris sitting on the couch in the living room, watching TV. Evana was in the kitchen chopping vegetables for dinner.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, acting more from motherly duty than really caring.

Evana nodded.

"We're cooking dinner for everybody," Larissa put in her ten cents, in case I didn't notice.

Suddenly, Iris came stomping into the kitchen.

"No," she shouted, tears flying off her rosy cheeks. "Something bad happened. Something terrible happened, and nothing is okay."

"What happened?" I lowered myself onto a bar stool, just in case.

"She signed up for a cheerleading practice and didn't tell me." Iris pointed at Evana with a dramatic gesture. "I wanted to sign up too. I'm the one with a great fit and a good voice to cheer here."

That was only partially true. Since she was born, Iris has been gifted with a very loud, high-pitched voice. Sounds she was making demanding food could be used as a weapon of mass destruction if recorded.

"Evana, how did you sign up for the practice?" I asked my stepdaughter.

"Dad did it, I don't know how," Evana replied, looking very upset. "I'm sorry. I didn't know Iris wanted to do cheerleading also. It's something I wanted to do for the last couple of years, but Dad was busy, but this year he says I should start."

"Mom, do you hear that? A cheerleading practice! I get nothing in this family." My sweet angel ran out of the kitchen sobbing.

"Call my coach. Maybe she needs another student," offered generous Evana. I, myself, decided to talk to Iris about such family values as her stepfather's wealth, and her right to get a piece without tears and hysteria.

My talk helped, and we had a relatively relaxing dinner on the porch next to the grill, consuming a great amount of barbecued chicken and prime ribs. Our shepherd sat next to me, breathing hot and drooling on my leg. I gave him a piece of meat when Alex turned his back to me.

"No feeding the dog at the table," Alexander said, without looking.

"Maybe Rachel should take a nap," Larissa suddenly suggested to my husband. "She woke up in the middle of the night, went outside and was absent for about an hour. She might have insomnia. I worry about her."

Alexander looked at me with a newfound interest. Secret about my investigating job burned a hole in me, but the story of the toilet tanks held me back.

"Elvis woke me up," I lied, petting the dog's silky fur. "He had an upset stomach and needed a long walk."

"Elvis should be on a diet and eat only the vet-recommended food," Alexander said wearily. "And you keep feeding him human food at the table."

Yeah, right! What have dogs been eating for the last ten thousand years? Human food! They stuck around us because of pancakes and prime ribs. However, I didn't plan to argue with my husband tonight, but would simply get into my cozy bed and cuddle up with the new Janet Evanovich mystery novel.

Past midnight, I suddenly remembered to call Debbie to tell her about the polygraph test tomorrow. I grabbed the receiver, locked myself up in the bathroom, and turned on the water, so my hubby wouldn't hear me talking.

Debbie sounded surprised, at the least.

"A polygraph test? Do you mean a 'lie detector'? Why do I have to take it? Gamma Woods claimed that the money and jewelry stolen from her when she was getting her stuff ready to move out of the office. Did you read my Irregular Incident Report?"

No, I didn't. Joe neglected to introduce me to it.

"Debbie, I know, it's terribly unfair, and it shouldn't have happened to you. But it happened. That's why we are working for you, to help you become whole again. Of course, it's unfair that you have to take this polygraph test, but this is a powerful tool to show people you're not a liar. By the way, the judge might order this Gamma Woods woman to take the test as well. Tomorrow morning at twelve, I will pick you up and take you there."

Disconnecting, I sighed with relief. The last thing would be for her to find out that I didn't know where the office of Planet Security was.

In deep thoughts, I opened the bathroom door and collided with Alex.

"Are you taking a shower with a phone?" he asked carefully.

"No, I was just checking my e-mails."

"It's a regular phone. It doesn't have a wireless network connection."

"That's why I couldn't check anything," I said coolly, and congratulated myself on a sharp comeback. In the kitchen, I warmed up milk and had it with honey: my best way to get asleep fast.

In the morning, I let myself stay in bed longer than usual, preparing for an important day. Larissa did all the morning routine for the girls and Alexander. In the morning, I let myself stay in bed a bit longer than usual, preparing for an important day. Larissa did all the morning routine for the girls and Alexander. Since I no longer had to wake up at the break of dawn to work and see the kids off to school, I stayed in bed as long as it was humanly possible.

I called Joe's office at a quarter of nine, but nobody answered. He didn't pick up his home phone, either. His cell phone was off. He was probably wearing off his pants in court. Cursing at his cheapness and reluctance to get a secretary, I left two voice messages and sent a text message to his mobile that I needed the exact time and place of the polygraph test.

In the kitchen, our new housemaid, Claudia Peres, was washing the floors. I tiptoed all the way across the wet floor to get my coffee, when I heard an entrance door opening and closing. Next, Elvis galloped into the kitchen, carrying a new toy in his mouth. Somehow, he missed my waking up and tried to make up for it now, jumping at me and offering to share the joy with him. When a hundred pounds of Elvis's muscles hit me in the stomach, I slipped on the wet floor and fell down. The quick-minded dog evaluated my brave movement for a second, and then put his new toy on my face, as I was sitting myself up. The toy, shaped like a life preserver, slid around my head and dropped on my shoulders.

"Oh," Claudia said, entering the kitchen with a brush and a bucket of water. She was a corpulent blonde Latino with a big nose and thick moustache. "Madam, take it off. You shouldn't put garbage on. This stupid dog took it from our front lawn. The other night, somebody dumped old toilets on our property. Jesus Maria, these people have no shame."

"Rachel, how are you today, dear?" Larissa came in, dressed in a long silk jacket and skirt of pale colors. My head mysteriously got stuck inside the ring, and our substitute grandmother rushed to help me take it off. She elegantly negotiated the wet tile floor with her kitten heel shoes.

"Oh," she exclaimed, turning Elvis's toy over. "It looks like a toilet seat. It's used and very dirty. Why would you hang it on your neck, Rachel?"

"Who let the dog out?" I asked indignantly.

"The dog ran away when Joe stopped by. He said he was admiring our landscaping, and asked if we started renovation of the house, because of the toilets sitting there on the front lawn." The old lady poured hot water for her tea and took a piece of paper from her pocket. "He left a note for you."

The note said: 555 Walnut Street at 2 pm.

In the next hour, I took a shower and got dressed for the trip. I wasn't even angry at my boss for his antics. We rarely, if ever, use our front driveway, because it takes too long to wait for the gates to open. This is the worst he could do, I thought. I will get back at him by solving the case and discovering the best material witnesses. The embryo of every lawsuit is greed, jealousy, revenge, or fear. Gamma and Debbie have just met, so there is no jealousy involved. Gamma got an offer for a different job with the company, so it's not greed or revenge that moved Gamma to destroy her new co-worker. Then, what we have left is fear. Gamma is afraid of something. It's plausible that Debbie, during her first orientation week, came across information damaging to Gamma. It was something that made Gamma believe that it was easier to get rid of the woman than to let her stay with the company with this information.

In the hallway, Claudia stopped me and asked me to call the township and ask them to remove the trash off the lawn. With a promise to call, I jumped into my Jaguar and took off, before something else came up.

I was driving along Pike Street towards Debbie's house when somebody honked at me. Looking around for an idiot, I saw Debbie in her gray Ford minivan waving madly at me. I parked and crossed the street to talk to her. The poor woman was shaking.

"Rachel, I've got a call from Matthew's school. Kids saw him in the woods behind the school, trying to set trees on fire. I have to get there before the police. I know how to stop him."

I got in her van, expecting to sit in filth. A single working mom with three kids doesn't have time for vacuuming the car. However, the van was spotless and even smelled good inside.

"Debbie, what exactly were they looking for when they hired you at NOSE?" I asked.

"Well, first they needed a native English speaker to teach ESL. I have some experience teaching English, since as a student I took a two-month trip to Mexico, where I volunteered as a teacher. It was a fun thing to do. After I agreed to take the job and had an interview with a human resources person, they gave me a new job description. It turned out that my position was called ESL Teacher/Job Developer, and that four days a week I was supposed to search for jobs for immigrants who are the clients of the company. In my mind, before I even started working, helping people to get decent jobs was like charity. If you know what I mean?"

I nodded.

She took a sip from her water bottle. "On May 4th, my first day of work, I received a fresh job description that ran on for two pages. Honestly, I worked for a couple of huge corporations in New York, and in other places, and I never saw a job description running through two pages. Besides teaching daily, consulting with students and developing new instruction materials, I'm supposed to hunt for jobs for immigrants, contact businesses and government agencies, and also recruit immigrants and refugees to become clients of this program. Also, I need to locate agencies and organizations, public and private, traditional and nontraditional, and pursue them in collaboration with this company. Besides, I have to perform case-working duty and to do clients' intake, to maintain voluminous case documentation."

"Sounds like an awful lot of jobs and responsibilities to me," I mumbled, impressed by her list.

"That's what I thought. I agree, it is a far cry from the teaching position I accepted." Debbie shrugged her shoulders angrily.

"Why would they trick you with a job description?"

"At first, I didn't know. Now, I understand that the people who work there, at the core of the program, are immigrants. They came to the country years ago, and they stayed with this company for ten to twenty years. They don't have an American education and they have a bizarre view of the ways American business operates. Until now, they had no problems dealing with the authorities and the job market. But now that the government has cut down on immigration, they desperately need somebody with perfect English and a knowledge of business. You know, before the 9/11 attack, the government accepted hundreds of thousands of new immigrants every year. The job market always needed more low-paid workers, and NOSE flourished. Somehow, they received a non-profit status that gave them significant privileges in conducting business. This surprised me at the very least, because they were making a hefty profit with their headhunt."

"How do they make their money?" I went from another end. Ultimately, I wanted to understand what information Debbie knew that would damage Gamma.

"This is the most interesting part," Debbie said, smiling. "I'm a Certified Public Accountant, so I always ask myself this question: How does the company make its money? And most of the time I would get no answer at all! At NOSE, I came across a very bizarre arrangement. I was helping Gamma to pack her documents, and... Oh, my God, it is a fire!" She screamed, parked the van, and ran out.

I followed her across the school parking lot into the woods that spread just three hundred feet away. Clouds of gray smoke were rising among the trees, without visible flames. Suddenly, a succession of sounds broke the silence. Either gunshots or burning evergreen branches.

"Matthew!" Debbie screamed and ran through the bushes, following her parental or maternal instinct. I tailgated her, breathing lungs full of bitter smoke. The cracking sounds were getting louder, and the next moment we stopped on the edge of a clear spot in the wood. Every tree and every bush around were burning like a torch. Fire, red and smoky, ran along the tree trunks like silk. I stopped in fascination and noticed a boy standing still in the midst of it all. Debbie grabbed her son from behind and tried to pull him out of the burning circle, but the fourteen-year-old just tossed her to the ground, with super strength, as if the fire gave him this creepy power.

"Matthew, let's go!" Debbie howled at the top of her lungs. She quickly rebounded back on her feet and grabbed her son again with both hands. The boy didn't look at her even once, just kept staring at the fire surrounding them. Suddenly, behind my back, the fire engine siren cut through the thick smoky air, and two shiny red fire trucks showed themselves among the trees.

I ran after Debbie and together we pulled her son away from the fire and out of the way of the fire crew. Matthew was taller and heavier than me, and in his stupor, his body felt like stone. Two firefighters were running toward us when Matthew saw them. He pushed his mother down again and hit me in my face with his elbow. For a second, I saw sparks flying, and my nose bled. The boy threw me off his back like a young mustang and ran towards the burning trees. Debbie got on her feet and ran after him, limping. Two heavily equipped firefighters ran behind her.

Without a sound or hesitation, Matthew ran into the burning bush. Debbie screamed hysterically but couldn't make herself go into the fire after her child. Considering the splitting pain in my eyes and nose, I didn't blame her. Two running firefighters passed her and entered the fire, looking like immortal creatures from outer space.

With a terrible noise, the fire engines finally opened their water supplies, and flooded the ground and my expensive shoes. I ran to Debbie, grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the clouds of smoke and steam and water. The police officer sent us to the ambulance, saying that the guys from the fire department got her son. "He's getting medical help," the cop added. "He got burned."

We found an ambulance parked in the school parking lot, and Debbie asked to look at her son. He was unconscious and heavily burned. His hair was gone; black cracks in his cheeks and hands oozed with a tear-like substance.

Debbie didn't even cry. Somebody gave her a bottle of water, she got into the ambulance, and they took off. A moment later, I realized I had an hour before the 'lie detector' appointment.

CHAPTER 7

Water ran down on the floor mat the moment I pressed the gas pedal. It's amazing how much water gets onto you when you try to put out a fire. I congratulated myself on my shoe choice. In the morning, I had picked up some reliable and simple-looking moccasins from Dolce & Gabbana. It is still unclear to me what one would be expected to wear, if, during working hours, one has to extinguish a fire and then show up at a high-end Center City security firm, accompanying a client, and representing Joe Madnick's law firm.

Joe didn't give me a security company phone number, so I couldn't just call and cancel the appointment. I had to drive there myself. During the next thirty minutes, driving to the city, I thought of getting organized by writing phone numbers, addresses and important dates. After all, the work of a detective is all about collecting data and synthesizing it.

I parked on the corner of 5th and Arch Street, which was just a block away from the hole in the wall we had rented with Iris after my third divorce. I got out of my Jaguar. Common wisdom says to wait for four years after a divorce. Don't wait, just do it, I say. I got divorced because something right and true waited for me and couldn't come to me, because my dysfunctional marriage was in the way. I recalled a black guy without a name. The police called him Joe Smith, who attacked me then. If it wasn't for him, Alexander would have walked right past me, looking through me without seeing me, and we would never be together. Call it destiny. I say, when something bad happens, look for something good around the next corner. (By the way, I never pressed charges against my attacker, and Alexander helped him to get legal aid. A year ago, he was out of prison and on his way to recovery from amnesia. I didn't know where the guy was at that point, but if he was in prison, it wasn't because of me.)

555 Walnut Street occupied a respectable-looking brownstone office building. Inside, the porter looked at me from head to toe, admiring, probably, my casual but smart style, took my signature and pointed to the fourth floor. He was very articulate, flipping four fingers at me and pointing all four fingers toward the elevator door. In the company's hallway, there was a huge brass eagle on the wall. In its beak it held a brass log with the lettering 'Planet Security' on it.

"Good afternoon. How can I help you?" A melodious woman's voice startled me, and I looked around for its source.

"Can I help you?" the same voice insisted. I crossed the hallway to look at a wooden structure bigger than some people's houses and found a woman sitting inside.

"Hi," I said. "I have an appointment at two o'clock for a polygraph test."

The secretary didn't even look at me, searching her computer.

"Oh, Deborah Cooper. Very good, madam. You can enter this door and wait there. Where's your lawyer?"

"He'll be here shortly," I said. "I didn't know he was supposed to be here, but if he was, he will."

Behind the door was a long, narrow corridor without windows. I crashed into one of the chairs along the wall and tried to call Joe, but his phone bounced me back. I wonder how his poor clients can reach him, if he's unreachable even to his own detective?

The door next to me opened, and a guy with huge upper arms looked out.

"Are you Deborah Cooper?" he asked crossly. His small but wise eyes searched me up and down and then stopped on my face.

"Er.," I said. "The deal is."

"What's this smell? Did you smoke here?" He wrinkled his nose just like my daughter had done, smelling something unpleasant.

"The restroom is at the end of the corridor. Don't smoke here! When you are done, come here and knock at the door. Do you understand English? Where's your lawyer?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly and headed for the restroom. They had a tiny unisex restroom. I peed first, then looked at myself in the mirror, and screamed. No wonder my Ivy League school English wasn't good enough for him. In the mirror, childhood's nightmare was staring back at me: ash-covered makeup like a gray mask on my face, my red hair styled with Curls Up gel all frizzed up in a hairball and hanging above my right ear. My L'Oréal super black mascara was smeared in big dark circles. Wet paper towels took off mascara and ashes, but my hair stayed dirty gray no matter how much I wetted it. I couldn't waste any of the paid test time anymore, so I returned to the door and knocked. The same guy let me into the room and directed me to the only chair.

"Sit here, please," he said, and when I took a seat, he buckled me up with wires. "Don't move," he said sternly. "Look over there, listen to my question and answer only 'yes' or 'no'."

"What if...?"

"Only 'yes' or 'no'."

"Are you Deborah Cooper?"

"Well, Cooper is actually a married name..."

"Yes or no?"

"Yes," I lied. After all, it was entirely this guy's fault because he never let me explain Debbie went to the hospital with her burned son, and Joe disappeared and wasn't answering my calls.

"Are you thirty-eight years old?"

"No! I'm thirty." I was actually thirty-five, but it wasn't for him to know. Now, I wanted to pass this test for Debbie, so we could sue Gamma Woods and the company. The poor woman was suffering too much, and nobody should get away with accusing their co-workers of stealing. Joe Smith came to my mind again. He accused me of attacking him, and if it wasn't for my material witness, Alex, I could be in prison right now.

"Sorry, could you repeat the last question?"

"Did you take Gamma Woods' money from her handbag?"

"No!"

"Did you take jewelry from Gamma Woods' handbag?"

What kind of jewelry was she carrying in her handbag?

"Yes or no?"

"No! Would you carry jewelry in a handbag the size of a hiking backpack?"

"I don't know. Don't ask me questions." He picked up the phone, which didn't even ring. "Hi, Joe. Yes, I have your client. She's here. She took a test. What do you mean? She looks like... a woman. What is her hair color? She has some grayish hair. Yes, she passed. Take care."

He slammed the receiver.

"Joe can't believe you're here. Said that you're a very brave kid."

I drove back home like mad, trying to beat the rush hour traffic. I didn't want Alexander to see me coming home late with my after-fire look and stench. Driving, I kept calling Joe and Debbie, and couldn't reach anybody.

The phone suddenly rang just when I tucked it safely away.

"Mommy, I want you here! It's an emergency, emergency!" A heart-wrenching voice cried for me through static.

I got the impression my daughter needed something from me.

"Where are you, sweetie?" I asked dutifully.

"I'm at school. Everything is ruined. My life is ruined. It's horrible, horrible. We have a cheerleading practice. Please, come here now." My daughter shouted through sobs. "Bring clothes."

She disconnected.

I reached for the glove compartment, got a secret stash of cigarettes, and lit one. I don't smoke, but always have them, as I have a chocolate bar and a bottle of Excedrin, as my Emergency Supply. Something happened at school that ruined my daughter's clothes. Hopefully, it wasn't fire. For a

second, a crazy thought came to my mind that Matthew had escaped the hospital and set my daughter's school on fire to get back at me. Oh, maybe they've got their own arsonist. I recall hearing on Fox News that sixty percent of firefighters are pyromaniacs and arsonists. Probably, it's as true as to say that sixty percent of police officers are control freaks; sixty percent of surgeons are sadists, and sixty percent of politicians are crooks. Even if it were a fire, why would Iris need clothes? I went through the fire this morning and I'm fine. Besides, this morning, she had such a sweet Ralph Lauren Pink Pony outfit.

Minutes later, I ran up the stairs of Bridgewater Private School, clenching my fitness clothes, which ride with me everywhere in the trunk of my car in case I get an urge to go to the gym.

As with any old private school, the Bridgewater School had its rules for kids and for parents. 'Socialize or go to hell' was the first among equal rules. Being an introvert, I wouldn't survive at this school a day, unless I was a good actress, which I thought I was. That's why I didn't even flinch when my steady trot was intercepted by Ester Daum, our rumor generator. I just said, "Ester, dear. You look great!"

"And you look... weird. And what's that smell? Are you smoking?"

"No, I don't." I moved away from her, breezing aside.

"Did you notify your health insurance company about your habits?" She smelled Clinique Happy.

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